Into the Woods: Nature and the Divine in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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"The dream of my life / Is to lie down by a slow river / And stare at the light in the trees – / To learn something by being nothing"
Mary Oliver, "Entering the Kingdom"

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“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, / The earth, and every common sight / To me did seem / Appareled in celestial light"
William Wordsworth, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"

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"I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in."
John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*

How was nature perceived in the late 14th century? What is the relation between nature and divinity in the late medieval period? How might we, and indeed, *why* might we, attempt a green reading of popular medieval texts? Victoria Rothschild writes that "medieval reading habits engaged directly with allegory and symbolism" (165) while modern ecocritics like Gillian Rudd believe that we insert too much of ourselves onto nature, anthropomorphizing it. How might we, then, navigate this tenuous line between reading medieval nature as only a reflection of one's interiority or as just a tree, a plot of land, a green space separated from humankind? In my own reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I'm intrigued that winter is the foe that nearly defeats Gawain, the gallant representative of King Arthur's renowned knights. However, I've not yet found scholarship that explores the long literary tradition of divine nature extending to antiquity, that also connects to the Gawain Poet. Immersed in winter and nearing death, Gawain prays three times for help, for divine aid or intervention. It's this moment that I find particularly striking, given that this Arthurian knight, nephew of Arthur, must reckon with his inability to escape this situation himself, by means of his knightly qualities: neither "trawthe" nor "cortaysye" will help him. Instead, Gawain must relinquish his ego and seek help from something—or someone—larger than himself. In this moment of supplication, of relinquishment and of prayer, nature releases its grip, Hautdesert appears, and Gawain survives. I believe we might read nature in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a quasi-divine force, an energy that—like the long literary tradition of Nature or Natura as a divinely ordained vice-regent under God—acts upon the will of humankind, urging him towards God-like perfection. The Gawain Poet's knight, we might argue, is as much on a knightly quest as a spiritual one, the temptations and tests set before him acting not upon his brute strength but on his internal grit. In this thesis, I'll attempt to

link *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to earlier representations of nature. And I will explore ways in which we might read the Green Knight as both a courtly—albeit green—figure, ultimately benevolent but certainly at times menacing, and as a representative of nature's divine force, if not exactly a personified Nature.

Before exploring nature in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I'll examine his predecessors and contemporaries, as well as the literary tradition of nature from antiquity to the Middle Ages. In doing this, we'll see more clearly where he adheres to this tradition, and where he deviates. The first chapter will explore early Western philosophical antecedents. I will then explore how nature, as a movement or force, connects to the medieval poetic tradition as seen in Alain de Lille and Geoffrey Chaucer. The second chapter will examine *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Medieval poets often used wilderness motifs to represent one's interiority or consciousness. As such, Gawain's interior progress and spiritual development is mapped by the movement and geography of his journey. I'll look at his movement throughout the poem, examining Gawain's encounters with wilderness, weather, and the temptations set before him at Hautdesert. And I'll examine the ways in which we might read the Green Knight as the force behind Gawain's journey from Camelot on his often-uncomfortable path towards self-awareness.

CHAPTER ONE

I. Early Western Influence on Medieval Nature

The allegorized and personified goddess Nature as she appears in medieval poetry represents a long history stretching from classical cosmological thought to the Middle Ages.

George Economou writes that "Natura's history is in fact in the mainstream of intellectual and artistic tradition flowing from ancient Greece and Rome to medieval Europe" (2). Social, cultural, as well as scientific and theological context shaped nature through the ages, with each thinker refashioning nature to make her their own. Before we dive into the late medieval poetry, let us first turn our eyes to nature as it was understood in the Western classical tradition. What begins as the contrasting views of Aristotle and Plato on the origin of universal movement, an essential aspect of nature, extends to other early Western thinkers, each of whom projected their own ideas until eventually the medieval poetic goddess Nature emerges: a divinely ordained personification of nature and the ruler of the sublunary, or natural, world.

Long before medieval allegorical poets like Alain de Lille and Chaucer conceived of Nature and endowed her with defining characteristics, nature and cosmology were closely intertwined. Early Western thinkers like Aristotle, Plato, and Plotinus, among others, viewed nature in a myriad of ways ranging from "the essence of things which have in themselves ... a source of movement" to "a creative principle directly subordinated to the mind and will of God" (Economou, 5). These views of nature influenced later medieval poets' interpretations of nature, paving the way for a personified Nature, a divine being under God. Aristotle believed the former to be the true definition of nature, that nature is "the source of the movement of natural objects, being present in them, either potentially or in complete reality" (Economou, 5). He believed too that the "processes of becoming and growing are called nature" (Economou, 6). It is this process of becoming that I believe is most relevant to the reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a spiritual allegory that I will propose in chapter two.

Both Plato and Aristotle agreed that movement was a vital aspect of nature and each sought to establish the original (or "prime") movement of the universe. Aristotle believed in two distinct universal movements, the translunary and sublunary, or the realms of heaven and nature or earth. And while Plato thought the "world-soul," a self-propelled original mover, to be the origin for all movement, in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle determined there to be a Prime Mover, an unmoving point of origin on whom both the heavens and nature depend, and a primum mobile, or what he called the first heaven (Crawford). Aristotle situates his Prime Mover—an entity he later refers to as God—outside of the realm of movement, though it, or perhaps He, commands all universal movement. Economou writes that Aristotle "explains all movement or change as the passing from potential to actual existence" (7). Nature is, for Aristotle, the process of becoming and growing (6). He argues that the first heaven or primum mobile eternally strives for God-like perfection, desiring to imitate Him and his self-awareness, and that all other beings within the sublunary realm similarly strive to be as close to the divine as possible in their thoughts, actions, and beliefs (7). The idea that nature acts upon humankind and that humankind desires to be as close to the divine as possible both in thought and action, in an attempt to achieve a higher state of self-awareness and spiritual consciousness, is an important prelude to how nature moves humankind in medieval poetry.

Aristotle's belief in a perfect point of origin and divine being beneath whom exists the whole of nature on the sublunary realm, paves the way for a hierarchical view of nature that extends far beyond even the medieval period.[1] Aristotle's heaven, a fixed, stable translunary

[1] Many later poets espoused this Aristotelian ideology, with John Milton's early modern ontology as seen in Paradise Lost being a very clear example of this. Writing as Raphael in conversation with Adam, Milton writes that all things are "Indu'd with various forms, various degrees / Of substance, and in things that live, of life; / But more refin'd, more spiritous, and pure, / As nearer to him plac't or nearer tending" and that humankind's soul is possessed with Reason, that allows for them to ascend from "body up to spirit." That humans and angels, or Adam and Raphael, differ "but in degree, of kind the same" (*Paradise Lost*, V.473-76; 478; 490).

realm, differs in degree or quality from the sublunary, the realm susceptible to change and subject to death and regeneration, a mutable world on which the ordering principle of Nature acts: "Well, but nothing natural or accordant with nature is without order; for nature is the universal determinant of order" (Aristotle). Nature, then, is a divine entity and intermediary, given that she possesses a direct line from heaven to the world of creation, and as such, God's divine energy extends through her to all beings. With his belief in an ordered nature, Aristotle foreshadows the goddess Nature of medieval poetry, a viceregent under God and an ordering principle who maintains harmony while guiding humankind towards their best state. His sense of an ordered and hierarchical universe in which humankind is the sole creature on the sublunary realm in possession of reason enough to ascend a metaphorical ladder to a state of higher self-knowledge or divine consciousness, is largely influential and can be seen in manifold subsequent literary periods.

Unlike Aristotle, Plato never explicitly defines nature in his *Timaeus* or elsewhere, nor does he personify it, and yet his cosmology remains a crucial influence on later poets and thinkers whose work bridges the gap between the nature of antiquity and of the medieval period. R. G. Collingwood, comparing Aristotelian and Platonic ideas of nature, writes that Plato "represents God ... as the efficient cause of nature," while Aristotle "identifying God with the forms, conceives one single unmoved mover with a self-contained activity of its own, namely self-knowledge" (87). All of nature, according to Aristotelian doctrine, strives for self-knowledge, with God as the inspiration behind the desire. Due to Plato's refusal to define nature, C.S. Lewis declared that no student of Nature in the Middle Ages "will find [anything] in the *Timaeus*," (36) the book in which Plato outlines his cosmology, examining universal origins and his views on the natural world and its perfection. Like Aristotle, Plato

sought the cosmological origin of movement, positioning his not in a Prime Mover but in the "world-soul." Closest to Aristotle's sublunary realm, or nature, the Platonic corporeal world is created by the Demiurge, a divine craftsman (Zeyl). Economou writes that "The transcendent, immaterial forms, which underly God's creative act and constitute the eternal, changeless model after which God fashioned the temporal, changing world of nature, are unlike the world of nature, which is alive with movement, 'in a process of creation and created'" (12). Unlike Aristotle again, who saw the world as mutable but ultimately good, eternally striving for God-like perfection, Plato views the world of mutability as something one could transcend, as an object to be overcome. Thus, Plato appears to believe in the ability to transcend one's corporeal state of being towards a place of greater divine awareness and knowledge.

After Aristotle and Plato, Plotinus is one of the most influential thinkers of antiquity. He builds upon the ideologies of his predecessors in *The Six Enneads*, a large work compiled by his student, Porphyry, in which his multiple treatises are collected. Plotinus most aligns his beliefs with Plato's, though his cosmological theory branches from the belief in a single "world-soul," as he posits three principles that he calls the “One,” the “Intellect” (or the “Mind,” also referred to as *nous*), and the “Soul.” The soul, he believes, contains two parts: a higher and lower part, the higher being the contemplative portion, able to grasp the “One,” a self-sufficient, divine entity. The lower part, however, he calls nature: "that what we know as Nature is a soul, offspring of a yet earlier Soul of more powerful life" (Plotinus, III.8.4). This lower portion of the soul, seemingly like Plato's corporeal and Aristotle's translunary realm, is mutable and subject to change, to vice, to suffering, and to death. And yet, the higher part

ensures that all souls (and thus, all beings) return to their original, divine state through contemplation, virtue, and the self-knowledge of the soul's true nature of existence (Moore).

The commentaries of Macrobius and Chalcidius, on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* (or *Somnium Scipionis*) and Plato's *Timaeus*, provided poets in the Middle Ages with a clear line to early Western ideas of nature, and more specifically, to Neoplatonic philosophy. Their commentaries informed later readers what Plato meant by a "world-soul," and projected an understanding of Aristotle's fixed, immortal, and divine translunary realm and its opposing sublunary realm, a mutable world subject to death but also to regeneration, ruled by nature. Macrobius believed there to be a single God, a world-soul, and two distinct realms: a celestial realm and a terrestrial one. He thought that "all things that lie between the topmost border and the moon are holy, imperishable, and divine because they always have in them the same ether and are never subject to the vacillations of change. Below the moon, air and the realm of change begin together, and the moon, being the boundary of ether and air, is also the demarcation between the divine and the mortal" (180-181). Like Aristotle, Macrobius demarcates the perfect realm of the heavens from one below: a created, mutable, realm of nature. In his hierarchy, or cosmology, the mind springs from God, then all other souls spring from the world-soul. From the world-soul spring both divine and celestial beings, and the bodies of the terrestrial realm, subject to transition, death, and decay (Economou). Macrobius believes too in a divine hierarchy:

> Accordingly, since Mind emanates from the Supreme God and Soul from Mind, indeed, forms and suffuses all below with life, and since this is the one splendor lighting up everything and visible in all, like a countenance reflected in many mirrors arranged in a row, and since all follow on in continuous succession, degenerating step

> by step in their downward course, the close observer will find that from the Supreme God even to the bottommost dregs of the universe there is one tie, binding at every link and never broken. (145)

Macrobius, describing what would later be called the Great Chain of Being, believes that God, from whom the Soul emanates, and the Mind from Soul, breathes life to all forms within the celestial realm. From there, the world-soul, "degenerating step by step" down towards the terrestrial realm as though walking down a ladder, connects all creatures—"even to the bottommost dregs of the universe"—with the divine. However, Macrobius believes that God endows man alone with reason: "Soul, degenerating as it came from the lower regions and to the earth, discovered that the frailty of the mortal realm made it incapable of sustaining the pure divinity of Mind ... Man alone was endowed with reason, the power of mind, the seat of which is in the head" (144). While beings on the “mortal realm” aren’t capable of "sustaining the pure divinity of Mind" (144) or of God, humankind alone can nevertheless ascend Macrobius' metaphorical ladder, by means of reason. Just as the nature of antiquity urges all beings to strive for God-like perfection, Macrobius' nature gives humankind the gift of reason, which can be used, I believe, to regenerate the soul and guide it back towards the divine. Macrobius' reason stands as a link between the terrestrial realm and the perfect, immutable divine world. And if Macrobius considers his terrestrial realm to be nature, then we might surmise an ability for nature—in the form of human beings—to ascend beyond the limits of the terrestrial realm, towards a more divine, perfect state. Finally, Macrobius believes in the division between an immortal, perfect heaven and an earth that is very subject to change. And, while he also believes that sublunary bodies (including those of humankind) are subject to death, he argues that the soul is immortal: bound as it may be in

the human body, the soul is nevertheless a divine—and eternal—creation. Economou writes, "the stuff of which [sublunary bodies] are made remains," even as they're "subject to birth and death" (19). The soul, Macrobius believes, rules the body, just as God rules over all else: both God and the soul are unmoved movers.

Chalcidius, another philosopher on the bridge between antiquity and the medieval period, writes that "all things that exist are either the work of God, or the work of nature, or the work of a human artist in imitation of nature" (Economou, 23-4). Chalcidius personifies the nature that acts as intermediary between the mind, or intellect, and the form, or matter. Thus, his Nature, an implicit intermediary between the divine and terrestrial realms, connects very closely to Alain de Lille's later portrayal of Nature as *vicaria Dei*, or God's vicar or executor. Lastly, for Chalcidius, the term "natura" describes the formation of the mutable, sublunary realm of creation and change (Economou, 22-3). As such, nature represents a vivifying power working on the lower counterparts of the universe.

A Hermetic text attributed to Apuleius, *The Asclepius*, echoes Neoplatonic ideals, with nature bridging the gap between "Soul" and all of creation, uniting everything into "One" whole. Trismegistus, speaking to and teaching Asclepius, tells him that all things are "embraced by nature," including the "Soul" and "World" (what G. R. S. Mead calls the "Cosmos" and what we might call the terrestrial or sublunary world) and that nature is the force keeping them in a state of perpetual "flux," or movement. All created beings—innumerable in count and highly varied, with discernible and "well-distinguished qualities"—bond together so "that all should seem as One" **(***The Corpus Hermeticum*). This large whole, including the Soul and the Cosmos, is ruled by God, and "hath ... been prepared by God as the receptacle of forms of every kind" (*Corpus*). Trismegistus tells Asclepius that "Forth-

thinking Nature ... by means of the Four Elements" creates such "forms" as would "give pleasure to the eye of God," (*Corpus*) before extending them up to Heaven. Thus, God, "who is Maker of all things" merely prepares the "whole" for the forms that Nature then fashions. God, Trismegistus seems to allude, flows through Nature, his seeming intermediary. And, if Nature must extend its "forms" *up* to Heaven, we might again locate nature in the sublunary world. And lastly, like Macrobius' belief that God endows man alone with reason enough to ascend towards a state of higher consciousness, Trismegistus explains that men, should they be "contented with mediocrity," can remain where they are, or, should they strive for their best possible state, man can achieve "Godlike piety by reason of his mind" (*Corpus*). The early Western philosophers and thinkers, in their attempts to articulate the workings of the universe, seem to agree that nature has a personal line to the divine, and that human beings, should they choose to exercise it, do as well.

Boethius, a Roman aristocrat born during the reign of the last Western Roman Emperor and known for his work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, serves as an intermediary between early Western philosophy and the Latin Middle Ages. His work, a lament written as a conversation between a personified lady Philosophy (“Philosophia”) and an imprisoned Boethius who awaits execution, sets out to understand the ways in which God governs humankind, and Philosophia's replies largely echo the views of Nature set forth by early Western philosophers (Marenbon). Economou writes that in Boethius' *Consolation* "nature is a guide for right behavior, because the individual who follows nature cannot but follow God" (33). While Roman poets like Boethius made Nature a ruler of the whole, without limitation, medieval poets recast her as both the creation of and vicar to God, divinely ordained but still the ruler of *His* sublunary creation. Boethius renders Nature—and I believe later

reimaginings of Nature do the same—as both teacher and guide: a personification capable of guiding humankind, endowed as they are with reason, towards transcendence, or a higher state of being.

II. The Goddess Nature in Alain de Lille and Geoffrey Chaucer

Early Western philosophers and thinkers, then, defined nature as a source of movement, a process of becoming, the ruler of Aristotle's sublunary realm, an ordering principle, a force or energy acting upon the will of humankind, urging them towards their best possible state, an intermediary between the divine and the terrestrial, a soul, and even a creative power through which (or whom) God acts. While many medieval thinkers received this cosmology of antiquity with their Latin and Greek, prominent among them Bernard Silvestris in *De mundi universitate*, there are two who explore and develop the personification of nature most forcefully: Alain de Lille and Geoffrey Chaucer. Their versions of the goddess Nature embody the longevity of classical characterizations of nature: nature as a force acting upon humankind, a divine intermediary, and as a personified being ordained by God. Yet they also accomplish something new.

Alanus Insulis, or Alain de Lille, a twelfth-century French poet best known for his two allegories, *De Planctu Naturae* (or *The Complaint of Nature*) and *Anticlaudianus*, writes a long complaint for Nature and later explores how God and Nature successfully craft a perfect human soul. Alain's work both builds on the long philosophical history of nature and establishes Nature as not just a divinely ordained entity, but a personified goddess, a vicar under God. The *De Planctu,* modeled primarily on Boethius' *Consolation*, explores the

disconnect between humankind and nature. It opens with a woman, descended from heaven, appearing before the narrator-poet, her stunning beauty momentarily distracting him from her grief, her eyes welled with tears. She, the goddess Nature, laments humankind's fallen behavior, telling the narrator-poet that she serves as God's vice-regent, and that she has created humankind as a mirror of the world, stamping "thy spirit ... with vital powers," such as reason (lines 24-25).

Alain, after amazing his narrator with Nature's presence, then moves towards an extensive description of Nature's chaste beauty, form, and accoutrements. Her appearance is "the height of perfection" (44-5): her gold hair shines "not with borrowed light, but with its own" (5-6), her forehead "wide and full and even" is "milk white lily in color" (19-20), her cheeks glowed like fire, "kindled with the light of roses," (33) and her eyes reflected a "clear calm, which attracted with friendly light, [offering] the freshness of twin stars" (24-5).[2] She wears a regal, gold crown atop her head, and, set with jewels, it shines with "dances of gems" (58). The shining gems represent the firmament, seven of them the planets (as only seven planets were known in the medieval period), the seasons, and within those, the twelve astrological signs. Depicted on her woolen garment with perpetually changing colors are creatures from "the realm of the air" (220-1), while her mantle, made of "fine linen, white shaded into green," (290) portrays the creatures of the sea, the mantle's "intricate folds" (294) the color of water. Her tunic, "embroidered ... with many colors" (340-2), details creatures of the earth, though a rip in it suggests man's inability to follow her laws as well as his sexual transgressions. Her shoes are decorated with images of "delicate flowers" (431-2), but Nature's undergarments prove elusive: the narrator can't say for certain what he sees there,

[2] Just because it's humorous: in my favorite line of Nature's description (and perhaps a medieval preoccupation?), her eyebrows were neither scant, nor had they grown "unduly into a forest of hairs" (22-23).

though he imagines trees shifting into foliage, then flowers, then mature fruit. Alain expounds Nature's appearance most fully for his medieval audience, first as a woman descending from the heavens, both associating her with God and establishing her position above the human realm. He then details the vastness of Nature's creation and her rule, her outfit representing each universal element over which she guides and keeps watch.

Tellingly, Alain's human narrator struggles to perceive Nature as she appears to him on Earth. He tells us that “at her appearance I had been stupefied … struck dumb at the strange presence of a marvelous apparition” (III. 289-91). Nature may be a *vicaria Dei*, but her relationship with humankind is fractured, a fact made evident in the sharp contrast between the poet's initial reception of her, and the response of the rest of creation. Before Nature tells the narrator of the division, or the “gulf of dissension” (IV.261) that exists between humankind and herself, Alain's narrator describes seeing Nature for the first time: "While I was collecting my rays of sight—the maniples, as it were, of my eyes—to contemplate the height of this beauty they, not daring to meet such grace and majesty, and weakened by the blows of splendor, fled, very fearful, to the tents of the eyeballs" (II.22-27). Like Spenser's Redcrosse Knight winces at the sight of Arthur's light, the poet's inability to grasp—and his immediate inclination to hide his eyes from—Nature's grace, suggests an alienation not just from Nature herself, but from her divinity and from the grace of God. All other creatures, however, that perceive her majesty and splendor, react with unbridled joy at her arrival. Alain writes:

> At the virgin's coming you have thought that all the elements were keeping solemn festival, renewing, so to speak, their own natures. The firmament ordered its stars to shine more brightly ... Phoebus ... poured out on the approach of the virgin all the riches of his

> light. The air ... rested pleasantly. Birds ... sported with delightful play of wings, and gave the virgin show of veneration. ... The sea now observed the coming of the virgin with solemn ceremony, and promised the perpetual peace of rest. ... Fish swam out into the upper waters ... and with joy and delight knew in advance the coming of their mistress. And maidens ... presented little gifts of aromatic nectar to the coming queen. The earth ... through the generosity of spring donned a purple tunic of flowers. And the spring, like an artisan skilled in weaving, in order the more happily to welcome her approach, wove garments for the trees. (II.37-66)

While man hides his eyes, all other things celebrate her and "with wonderful rivalry" they act in a way pleasing to Nature. Portending Nature's attempt to remove the "little cloud of stupor" (III.273) from the narrator's eyes, the sun "banishe[s] winter's shade," ending its cold exile, and summer "awakens the dead grasses, commanding all to rise from their burial mounds … wip[ing] away the tears of winter," the earth no longer shaded or "groaning with the sluggishness of winter" but awake with "joyful light" and renewed life at the arrival of Nature (23-4, 30, 32-33, 34-5). Nature speaks to the poet, as he appears to be both worthy of her presence, and to stand as representative for the whole of humankind, explaining the origin of her disappointment in man. Nature tells the poet (and Alain's larger medieval audience) that she has given man the gift of reason and that reason, "taking its rise from a celestial source, passes through the low levels of earth, and, watchful of heavenly things, turns again to heaven" (III.88-91). Reason, however, is in constant conflict with lust and lust, Nature warns, will pull him downward, causing humankind to "wander waywardly," (III.92) leading the "mind into the ruin of vices" (III.92, 94-5). If, however, the narrator exercises reason over lust, his mind will "ascend to the serenity of virtue" (III.96-7). Only those

capable of tempering their desires and controlling their mind, Nature tells her rapt audience of one, can reach their highest potential. Thus, Alain's poet requires Nature's guidance to remove the veil placed upon him by his fallen state, to reconnect him with Nature, and position himself on the path of ascension to higher consciousness.

Unlike ancient cosmologists, Alain must navigate Aristotelian views of nature within his medieval Christian context. As such, he limits Nature's power, making it clear for his audience that her divinely ordained force cannot exist without God's power. Nature tells the poet, "I profess most emphatically that I am the lowly disciple of the Supreme Ruler ... He is the maker, I am the made; He is the Creator of my work, I am the work of the Creator; He works by His own divine will, I work under His name" (III.204-206, 211-216). Alain's Nature lacks the agency to *do* anything for humankind, except to guide them towards their best possible state, but more importantly, this line establishes a Nature figure in the medieval period as a being created by God, in his name, through whom he works. She is limited to the role of God's intermediary, able to act upon and guide those under her rule. She explains to the narrator what he must do if he desires to better himself spiritually, though she lacks the power to elevate his consciousness herself. Thus, the narrator's understanding of Nature and the divine can only be clarified if he internalizes her teachings and chooses to pursue reason over passion. That Alain writes the *De Planctu* as an allegory is intentional: the form mirrors the content. His story is one in which humankind must search levels of meaning for the correct path forward. The form mirrors Nature's conversation with the poet. The poet, upon hearing Nature's speech, falls at her feet, finally declaring that the illusion, the "little cloud of stupor, which had lain close on my mind, [has] lifted" (III.273-4).

Alain's narrator, no longer hidden beneath the "dark obscurity" (III.297) of ignorance, asks Nature why she's crying, and she complains of humankind's transgressions. With Alain's obsessively negative views of sexuality on full display, Nature, declaring earth a "common brothel" (IV.8), decries man's shameless violation of her laws, and their rejection of chastity: "Such a great body of foul men roam and riot along the breadth of the whole earth, by whose seducing contact chastity herself is poisoned" (IV.127-130). She continues, telling the narrator that "unholy men dare to practice licentiousness" while "virtuous men may respect the character of chastity" (IV.148,149-50). Her tunic, she tells him, is ripped to show these "abuses and injuries" caused by man, who choose the "idleness of sensuality" rather than "penetrate the secrets of the heavens" (I.344-6). While Alain simultaneously attempts to establish Nature's moral righteousness while attacking sexual deviance (what we can presume means homosexuality), he inadvertently establishes a case for chastity that I believe we also see in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Nature then tells the narrator that she appointed Venus as her "under-deputy" and that Venus once performed her work with "obedient care" (V.194). The adulterous wife of Hymen and mother of Cupid (he, a "tangled maze" IV.411), Alain's *De Planctu* details Venus' disintegration, associating her with the delights of Bacchus and the vices of Gluttony, Avarice, Pride, Envy, and finally, Flattery. The narrator tells Nature that he wishes she would strengthen his mind against "the furious armies of these vices" (VII.17) by the "bulwarks" (VII.18) of her teachings, which are "founded on reason" (VII.19). Alain, solidifying Nature's place as moral superior in opposition to Venus and all others "lying sick with the acute fever of sensual passion" (V.275-6), positions Nature with Hymen, alongside the virtues of Chastity, Temperance, Generosity, and Humility.

Towards the end of his allegory, Alain introduces Genius, whom we're told has a child with Nature: Truth. Though there's much to tease out allegorically, Wetherbee writes concisely of this union that their kiss signifies "the transmission of the Divine Wisdom into the sphere of Nature" (qtd. in Economou, 92). Nature, imbued with wisdom, virtuous, and the mother of Truth, stands as the intermediary between humankind and the divine, able to transmit that divine knowledge to man. John of Salisbury writes in his *Metalogicon:* "Thus when love of reason, which concerns earthly things, ascends with prudence to the hidden secrets of eternal and divine truths, it becomes transformed into wisdom, which is in a way exempt from mortal limitations" (23). Alain's personified Nature, immortal and divine, attempts to teach exactly this to those under her rulership: when humankind embraces reason, they might better grasp the divine wisdom possessed by Nature, though not without work. While Nature remains subservient to God, on whom humankind's restoration ultimately rests, Alain's narrator and audience must nevertheless continuously strive to perceive the truth of Nature, a truth that hides within the integuments of the text, in order to lift the "cloud" hanging over their minds. If Alain's poet, representative of all human beings worthy of Nature's presence, can follow Nature, he can also find his way back to God. The *De Planctu* ends ambiguously: the narrator awakes, equipped with the tools to follow the path of reason, but whether he'll succeed is yet to be told.

Geoffrey Chaucer personifies Nature in multiple ways. In his *Parliament of Fowls,* he speaks to Alain de Lille, and to the larger philosophical history Alain also draws from, personifying a goddess Nature who presides over a parliamentary meeting of speaking birds. In a departure from Alain, Chaucer does not personify Nature as a goddess in the opening lines of his *Canterbury Tales*, where Nature is a formless infinitude, a divine force that

propels folks to go on religious pilgrimage. (It's the latter that I believe we see in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.) It's evident to readers of Chaucer that he is familiar with the ideas of early Western natural philosophers, and that he came to them in part through Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, which he cites explicitly at one point in the *Parliament*, and the works of Boethius, whose *Consolation of Philosophy* Chaucer translates as *Boece*. As Rosamund Tuve writes, the "idea of God's purposeful direction, through his vicaress Nature, was an integral part of the concept in Alanus [and] in Boethius as Chaucer translated him" (13). The same applies to his *Parliament*, where Nature serves not just as *vicaria Dei*, but as an integral ordering principle for the sublunary realm.

The poem, compelling for both its sense of harmony in form and for its obscure division, opens with a narrator speaking to his audience with, incidentally, one of my favorite lines in the Chaucerian canon: "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne" (l.1). This young narrator, who we soon learn is a student of love though he knows "nat Love in deede" (l.8), begins with his reading of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*. Africanus, he tells us, appears to Scipio in his dream, guiding him first to "a sterry place" (l.43) where Africanus can then show him a "blysful place," a place where "There as joye is that last withouten ende" (48-9). Africanus then asserts that he can reach heaven and divine bliss by working for "commune profit," (75) and yet the narrator finds that this lesson doesn't address the information he seeks: "And to my bed I gan me for to dresse, / Fulfyld of thought and busy hevynesse; / For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde, / And ek I ne hadde that thyng that I wolde" (88-91). On putting down the book and dressing for bed, he realizes he now has something he *didn't* seek, and still lacks the thing he desires: knowledge of love.

Africanus appears before the narrator in his own dream, and guides him to the gate of "a park walled with grene ston" (122).[3] The *locus amoenus* in which he arrives is unquestionably paradisal, and it's made clear that we're to connect this garden with the "blysful place" (48) mentioned prior. Over the gate are wrought two inscriptions: one in gold and one in black. As in Alain's version of the Nature tradition where man was told to follow Nature and not Venus, here the narrator faces similar guidance: entering the gold gate he can access a "blysful place … the way to a al good aventure." The black gate warns, however, that should he enter, "Disdayn and Daunger" will be his guides (127, 131, 136). With a "shof" or push by Africanus, he's through the gates with little choice. Once in, he encounters "trees clad with leves that ay shal laste, / Ech in his kynde, of colour fresh and greene / As emeraude, that joy was to seene" (173-5). In the first description of the enclosed garden, the narrator expresses his joy at the abundance of trees clad in everlasting leaves, leaves that "ay shal laste," echoing the immortal May from the gold inscription on the gate: "There grene and lusty May shal evere endure" (130). He follows with a stanza-long catalog of trees that the later, and much larger, catalog of birds will echo. The trees he encounters, more a small forest than a smattering of trees, also allude to the vast creation over which Nature rules, making order out of its instinctively chaotic, mutable state. In twelve stanzas, Chaucer shows us paradise, even making Nature's "armonye" (63) audible, as the narrator soon hears "the welle … of musik," as "bryddes … synge" (190) with angelic harmony, and instruments play with a "ravyshyng swetnesse" (198) and a soft wind blows.

[3] Victoria Rothschild tells us that "Chaucer stresses greenness, and green stone in particular—the park is walled with it, the trees are like emerald, the temple is on pillars of jasper" (181). Rothschild reminds us that the "specific association of jasper is of course with the wall of the Heavenly City" (181n49).

From there, the narrator happens upon Cupid, the God of Love, "under a tre, besyde a welle," far removed from the temple in which Venus resides. The narrator arrives at this "temple of bras," and it's here that Chaucer deviates from his source material, making a few significant changes from Boccacio's *Teseide*. The narrator sees "Dame Pees" sitting before the temple "ful soberly" (239), and next to her "Dame Pacience," upon "an hil of sond" (243). In contrast to the harmonious sounds of the "grene mede," the dominant sound inside the temple is that of "sykes hoote as fyr" (246), sighs "engendered with desyr" (248), that fan the flames of the altar fires. In the garden it is "ay cler day" (210) whereas inside the temple it is dark, nighttime, and light "unnethe it myghte be lesse" (264). That Chaucer repeats this line exactly once before in the garden scene (line 201) suggests his desire for readers to connect—and contrast—the two symmetrical scenes.

Chaucer adds details to Boccaccio's Priapus and preeminently displays him, introducing him after "Jelosye" and immediately before Venus, whom Chaucer places in a dark corner. Chaucer makes Priapus a god carrying a scepter in his hand, while men are seen placing garlands of "sondry hewe" (258) upon his head. As Priapus is neither a god nor a king, he likely wouldn't hold a scepter, which appears to be a bawdy joke on Chaucer's part. Finally, we meet Venus "in a prive corner in disport," with her porter "Richesse" (261). Her golden hair loosely tied, Venus lies on a bed of gold "til that the hote sonne gan to weste" (266), covered only with a "subtyl coverchef of Valence" (272). Like Alain's Venus, set alongside Bacchus and Gluttony, Chaucer's Venus is attended on either side by Bacchus and Ceres (the goddess of agriculture, or food) with two "yonge folk" on their knees near her, crying for her help. The narrator, seemingly uninterested in Venus' display, tells us that "thus I let her lye" (279), and he continues deeper into the temple. He notes the broken bows of "Dyane the

chaste” (281) hung in spite upon the wall. And, in an attempt to cement for his audience that the way of passion or lust leads only to destructive, painful, and often thwarted love, the narrator describes the stories of famous lovers “and in what plyt they dyde” (294) painted on the wall, including Dido, Paris, Achilles, Cleopatra, Tristan, and Isolde. The images of unhappy couples suggest that the two “yonge folk” situated near Venus, seeking her help, might soon join their ranks. He leaves the temple and returns to the garden, a place of solace, “so sote and grene” (296).

The narrator finally glimpses "facound" Nature, "a queene / That, as of lyght the somer sonne shene / Passeth the sterre, right so over mesure / She fayrer was than any creature" (298-301). Like Alain's Nature, she far surpasses any other creature the narrator has seen, like the summer sunlight surpasses the light of any star. Chaucer’s Nature, positioned in a glade, is surrounded by birds:

> And in a launde, upon an hil of floures,
> Was set this noble goddesse Nature.
> Of braunches were here halles and here boures
> Iwrought after here cast and here mesure;
> Ne there nas foul that cometh of engendrure
> That they ne were prest in here presence
> To take hire dom and yeve hire audyence. (302-308)

The narrator’s description of Nature overflows with rich imagery. In contrast to Dame Pacience, perched “upon an hil of sond,” and Venus, found within the darkness of an artificial, brass temple, the noble goddess Nature sits upon a “hil of floures” under the “somer sonne” (299) with an abundance of life surrounding her, her “halles” and “boures”

made of branches. The use of "mesure" and "engendrure," as well as the ample flowers and large number of birds surrounding Nature, simultaneously reiterate the goddess's capacity for temperance as well as plenitude. As evidenced by the repetition of "so ful," the goddess presides over an enormously abundant creation: so many birds crowded to hear the judgment of Nature, our narrator tells us, he could scarce find space "for me to stonde" (315).

Chaucer's narrator then names Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, as the book in which one might read about Nature's appearance:

> And right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde,
> Devyseth Nature of aray and face,
> In swich aray men myghte hire there fynde.
> This noble emperesse, ful of grace,
> Bad every foul to take his owne place.
> As they were woned alwey fro yer to yeere,
> Seynt Valentynes day, to stonden theere. (316-322).

The narrator links Chaucer definitively to his predecessor, as he pays homage to Alain's intricately detailed Nature, or "Kynde,"[4] whose jewels and garments expressed for his audience the extent of her domain as goddess or *vicaria Dei*: her crown the firmament and heavens; her clothing, the air, earth, and sea; her shoes, flora. Chaucer directs his readers to Alain's description should his audience desire a clearer image of the goddess, avoiding the work himself. While Alain's description focuses on the rip in Nature's tunic, Chaucer ignores this, for his narrator (and thus, his work) reads more as a "study of man's eagerness ... to

[4] Stanbury notes that Chaucer tends to use the terms "kynde" and "nature" interchangeably ("Ecochaucer," 7), while Hugh White equates "kynde" with God in the second half of another medieval poem, *Piers Plowman* (Stanbury, 16).

follow Nature's decree than of his reluctance to behave according to her law" (Economou, 141).

Allusions to order and harmony (or "order" and "acorde") permeate Chaucer's work, and he, like Alain, depicts Nature as "the vicaire of the almyghty Lord" (379), as both God's agent and the primary ordering principle or force in the divine cosmos: through her, harmony can be achieved and maintained throughout Chaucer's sublunary realm, his "lytel erthe" (57). The congregation, full of activity and great variety, represents the enormous array of creatures (in this case, avian species, comprising five stanzas and ranging from courtly birds to slightly lower counterparts) over which Nature presides and attempts to both order and guide. Chaucer allows us a momentary glimpse of the birds' capacity as agents of near chaos, should Nature have left them to run amok by their own devices.

Nature treats the various birds in her parliament quite differently, behaving to each in accordance with her perception of their position. The eagles are under her "statute" while the other birds—who speak as a species and not as individuals, as the eagles do—are under her "governaunce." Some she allows to perform their mating according to their will; on others she imposes her own. Some desire to choose their mate, to "chese with wil, and herte, and thought," (417) while others are allowed just that: Nature gives to the birds who are led by "Resoun," and allow reason to "counseyle" them, "choys al fre" (649). Victoria Rothschild writes that "Nature does behave in [a] radically different way to different classes of *creature*," (174) suggesting that Chaucer's *Parliament* represents varying states of *being* rather than societal classes, not unlike Macrobius and his belief in a great chain of divine being, a hierarchy extending from heaven to even the lowliest species.[5] The eagles, who are

[5] Chaucer's also depicts a similar vision of the universe bound by hierarchical and harmonious order, the "faire cheyne of love" (l.2988), in his *Knight's Tale*.

most like humankind in this hierarchy of creature, speak individually, are given a will of their own, and as such, are able to choose a mate according to that will, and appear to possess self-knowledge as well as reason. Guided by Nature's divine "governaunce," the eagles aspire to their best possible state, as they strive for higher levels of consciousness. Nature accords varying resolutions for the different birds, befitting the nature—and will or lack thereof—of the creatures and they all joyously accept Nature's decree, maintaining harmony and natural order. Chaucer appears to similarly accept and celebrate Nature, as a goddess in possession of God's grace, and as a divine force capable of maintaining universal harmony. His poem perpetuates the literary tradition of Nature as both a guide and an ordering principle through whom God works well into the late medieval period.

Chaucer then pivots from depicting Nature as a personified goddess, and instead crafts Nature as a divine force or energy that acts upon the will and hearts of humankind. The beginning of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reads, "And small foweles maken melodye / That slepen al the nyght with open eye / So priketh hem Nature in hir corages / Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" (lines 9-12). This new and slightly different Nature appears in line eleven, a line nearly always punctuated—and often parenthesized—by modern editors to reflect back on the previous line, linking "hem" and "hir" with "small foweles." This suggests it's the *birds* "corages," or their heart, spirit, disposition, or temperament (Middle English Compendium) on which Nature acts, as she "pricks" or agitates, stirs, and incites (MEC) them to "maken melodye." Sarah Stanbury questions this, suggesting instead that we look at Chaucer's original manuscripts—punctuation free—to derive a new reading of Nature's actions. If we follow Stanbury's lead and ignore the confines of both modern editorial decisions and parentheses, we might also link "hem" and "hir" to the folks longing for

religious pilgrimage found in the following line ("longen folk to goon on pilgrimage" 12). That Chaucer rhymes “corages” with “pilgrimage” implicitly suggests this connection between religious pilgrimage and the forces (or “pricking”) of nature.[6] In this interpretation, unrestrained Nature agitates, stirs, and incites humankind, acting upon the hearts and will of people to provoke the desire for a spiritual experience. Nature, while not the goddess seen in Alain’s *De Planctu* or Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, nevertheless remains a divine force acting upon humankind within the sublunary realm, urging them out the door towards God.

CHAPTER TWO

I. Divine Nature in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door," he used to say. "You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to."
J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

The anonymous Gawain Poet, Chaucer's fourteenth-century contemporary, crafts an Arthurian legend complete with a mysterious green knight challenging the knights of Camelot to a beheading game, grisly hunts, attempted seduction, and an exchange of winnings. A. C. Spearing writes that "we cannot say that man in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is confronted, directly, or indirectly, with the divine" (234). Derek Brewer, in his discussion on the significance of the color green, condemns critics who link the Green Knight to "an emanation of a vegetation-god, a life-giving spirit," or connect him with "the so-called Green Man—the architectural feature of a face peering through leaves, widespread

[6] Chaucer uses the main verb “prick” elsewhere in his canon to describe both horseback riding and sex. If we link “Nature” and “pricks” and “corages” with the people, Nature’s act (and Chaucer’s innuendo) might be read as quite bold and explicit. Perhaps, then, there’s an editorial aim to isolate human erotic desire from its close proximity to the desire for religious pilgrimage by means of parentheses or bracketing.

in ancient, and medieval building," classifying them as part of "that wider cult of 'nature' and neo-paganism" (181-2). I disagree slightly with both authors as I think such arguments elide the long literary history of personified Nature as both a divine intermediary and guide, and as an energetic force acting upon humankind, urging them back to God. While I'm not sure we can classify the mysterious Green Knight as a vegetation god, it seems that critics who do are simply responding to the Green Knight's power and ambiguity, attempting to define and contain him in the same way Arthur's guests might also have done. Rather, I agree with Simon Armitage who writes that "It is not just for decoration that the poem includes passages relating to the turning of the seasons, or detailed accounts of the landscape, or graphic descriptions of our dealings with the animal kingdom. ... [The Green Knight] is something in the likeness of ourselves, and he is not purple or orange or blue with yellow stripes. Gawain must negotiate a deal with the man who wears the colors of the leaves and the fields. He must strike an honest bargain with this manifestation of nature, and his future depends on it" (12).[7] I believe we can read Gawain's journey into the wilderness towards imminent death in light of the early Western views of nature: as a quasi-spiritual allegory, with the Green Knight—a "potently coercive, often but not always benign" (Stanbury, 13) representative of Nature—as the force that rouses Gawain from Camelot and towards greater self-awareness.

It seems that in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, nature makes itself known to all, even those sheltered behind the comforts and delights of courtly life. The Gawain Poet's Camelot is a place of revelry and gaiety, filled with many a "luflych" (line 38) lord and "lovelokkest" lady (52), where a "childgered" (86) King Arthur rules over "a fayre folk in her first age" (54). We first see Arthur's Camelot, the idealized pinnacle of medieval courtly life, at

[7] Or, as Gillian Rudd succinctly states, the Green Knight "with his green skin, green horse and holly branch clearly represents nature in some way" (*Greenery*, 109).

Christmas, as the knights and nobility celebrate the holiday and New Year with jousting tournaments, caroling, and feasts, exchanging both kisses and presents. However, the ebullient king cannot sit for long, "So bisied him his yonge blod and his brayn wilde" (89) nor will he join his guests in eating until he is told "an uncouthe tale" of adventure, "of sum mayn mervayle that he myght trawe" (93-4), or until a knight is challenged to joust, to lay his life on the line for the entertainment of the court. It's at this moment that the Green Knight interrupts the jollity, silencing a stunned court with his sudden entrance to the hall. An "aghlich mayster," he's also very handsome, the "myriest in his muckel": extraordinarily tall in stature ("On the most in the molde on mesure hyghe"), square and thick-set from neck to waist ("Fro the swyre to the swange so sware and so thik"), his back and chest are broad, but he's narrow in waist with a taut stomach ("For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne / Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale"), with sides and limbs so long and large, that the narrator believes him to be half-giant ("And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete, / Half etayn in erde I hope that he were") (135-140, 142-144). This fearsome lord is also entirely green: "and overal enker-grene" (149).[8] The Green Knight and Guinevere are the only figures described fully in Fitt I of the poem, and though we briefly admire Guinevere's beauty (specifically, her eyes: "ther glent yyen gray" 82), our gaze settles on the unambiguously attractive male intruder (whose description spans almost one hundred lines), subverting traditional romance gender roles, for "wel gay was this gome gered in grene" (179).

The narrator draws attention to the Knight's tailored, highly ornamented clothing. Throughout the Middle Ages, people dressed according to their status, and despite his large

[8] "Enker" is of Norse derivative, meaning "vivid" (Brewer, 190).

stature and strange hue, the enigmatic Knight—arrayed almost entirely in green—wears clothing befitting the world of the court: a straight, tailored coat that fit tightly to his sides ("A strayt cote ful streght that stek on his sides"), a mantle and hood lined with pure white ermine ("A mere mantile abof, mensked withinne, / With pelure pured apert, the pane ful clene, / With blythe blaunner ful bryght, and his hod bothe, / That was laght fro his lokkes and layde on his schulderes"), tight, green hose on his calves and beneath them gold spurs (Heme, wel-haled hose of that same grene, / That spenet on his sparlyr, and clene spures under / Of bryght golde, upon silk bordes barred ful ryche, / And scholes under schankes there the schalk rides"). Recalling the embroidered, gem-adorned tapestries and silks that surround Guinevere's dais (and perhaps also Alain's Nature, whose crown shines with gems, and whose woolen garment depicts a parliament of birds), the Knight's attire is set with emerald gems, lavishly adorned with gold, and embroidered with birds and butterflies: "Bothe the barres of his belt and other blythe stones, / That were richely rayled in his aray clene / Aboutte hymself and his sadel, upon silk werkes, / That were to tor for to telle of tryfles the halve / That were enbrauded abof, wyth bryddes and flyyes, / With gay gaudi of grene, the golde ay inmyddes" (151-167). Derek Brewer describes the Green Knight's costume as "the height of fashion ... a wonderful example of power dressing without armour" (188) while Gillian Rudd writes that the Green Knight's dress, ornamented with birds and insects, "invites us to regard the Green Knight as part of the tapestry, almost as if he himself is the plant amongst which these birds and insects roost or live, and surely invokes the figure of the Green Man, even if it does not quite fulfil his usual specifications" (*Greenery*, 110-111).

His hair, matching that of his horse, flows over his shoulders, "fayre fannand fax umbefoldes his schulderes" (181), and his beaver-hued beard hangs like a bush over his chest, "a much berd as a busk over his brest henges" (182). It mingles with his hair to settle around him at his elbows, enclosing his arms like a "kynges capados that closes his swyre" (186). The Green Knight's horse (who is also entirely green) is outfitted similarly: his breast-harness, crupper, bridle, stirrups, saddle-bows, and saddle-skirts, "That ever glemered and glent al of grene stones" (172). He wears no armor, but carries a holly sprig in one hand and a huge and monstrous ("hoge" and "unmete") axe in the other: "But in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe, / That is grattest in grene when greves ar bare, / And an ax in his other" (206-208).[9] He speaks with remarkable candor about his desire for peace, that "Ye may be seker bi this braunch that I bere here / That I passe as in pes, and no plyght seche" (266-7). Likewise, he tells Arthur that his choice of dress was intentional, he wants no war and his clothing reflects that: "Bot for I wolde no were, my wedes ar softer" (271). Despite this, the Green Knight—and his purpose at Camelot—remains ambiguous, as he straddles the boundaries of courtly life and something "other," something natural and wild. His attire befits the sophistication of court while the length of his hair, his untamed bush-like beard, his size, and his hue act as a "veneer of wildness" (Meredith, 62), defying it. Arthur's assembly appears dumbfounded by the Green Knight's intrusion, stunned and frightened into silence. The timing of the Green Knight's entrance into Camelot suggests an implicit connection with the folkloric Green Man, a being who signifies "irrepressible life" (Anderson, 14). Like Alain's de Lille's springtime that, upon the arrival of Nature, banishes winter's shade and ends its

[9] Derek Brewer writes of holly's association with peace ("a branch in the hand was a sign of peace") and Christmas: holly and ivy are linked to the Christmas carol, with holly personified as masculine, "the inevitable choice for [the Green Knight]. It's prickliness also fits in with his aggressive masculinity, and its greenness in winter with his vitality and power of survival" (187).

cold exile, and his summer that “awakens the dead grasses” from their burial mounds, the Green Man embodies this new life that revives after the “sluggishness” of winter (Rudd, *Greenery*, 111). And, just as Alain’s narrator-poet stood silent at Nature's appearance, his clouded relationship with nature rendering him afraid and unable to grasp her full splendor, the Gawain Poet's court might also struggle to comprehend the appearance of the natural world—or its representative—within the man-made artificiality of Camelot. The arrival of the Green Knight answers Arthur’s call for some “mervayle” while simultaneously emphasizing the divide between the people of Arthur’s court and the natural world, so much so that he is immediately thought to be supernatural or otherworldly. Thus, if we consider the Green Knight's verdant skin, bush-like beard, flowing locks, and holly sprig to be emblematic of nature, this would indeed be a stunning moment for those in Arthur's court, to encounter a being in direct connection to and in harmony with divine laws, perfect in his wildness, free from the ego and confines of humankind. Aspects of his wildness appear momentarily cultivated and restrained.

The Green Knight tells Arthur that he's been drawn to his court by its reputation, as he desires a "Crystemas gomen": "Bot for the los of the, lede, is lyft up so hyghe, / And thy burgh and thy burnes best ar holden, / Stifest under stel-gere on stedes to ryde, / The wyghtest and the worthyest of the worldes kynde" (258-61). Because of Arthur's renown, lifted high, his castle and men are known to the Green Knight as the best, bravest, and worthiest of the world's "kynde," or nature. The language used by the Knight echoes that of earlier philosophical texts: as Macrobius and *The Asclepius* state, all humans are endowed with reason enough to ascend or "lyft" themselves back to a state of divine consciousness, while only the "worthyest" of them strive towards their best possible state. As in Alain's *De*

Planctu Naturae, where Alain's narrator-poet represents all those who are worthy of Nature's presence and guidance, the Gawain Poet suggests a similar worthiness in Camelot should any knight desire to exercise it.

Yet, the macabre nature of his Christmas game stuns the court into deeper silence: "If he hem stowned upon fyrst, stiller were thanne / Alle the heredmen in halle, the hygh and the lowe" (301-2). The Green Knight taunts their discomfiture and Arthur responds angrily, accepting the challenge, taking the knight's unfamiliar axe and brandishing it. However, the Green Knight has also roused Arthur's nephew, Gawain. From his seat beside Guinevere, and with impeccable timing, Gawain bows towards Arthur, addressing him in plain, urgent, and familiar language, speaking to Arthur as an uncle rather than as a subordinate to his king. He tells Arthur of his desire to take on the Green Knight's, speaking not only to Arthur but to his council and queen, Guinevere: "I beseche now with sawes sene / This melly mot be myne" (341-2). Gawain's "cortaysye" and rhetorical skill on display, his argument is brief and, through much self-abasement, his entreaties bolster the self-esteem of the king, Guinevere, and Arthur's knights. Gawain's method is successful, yet he reveals his motives through both flattery and the embedded "I hope" (352) and "I wot" (354), as we are made keenly aware that despite his apparent selflessness, his ego has been awakened by the verdant intruder, and he desires the challenge. Spearing writes that "when Gawain, with a formal gesture of submission, receives the Green Knight's axe from the king, he is becoming both his personal substitute and, in the most open and official way, the representative of the whole court" (183). Like Alain's narrator is worthy of Nature's guidance, the Gawain Poet implies Gawain's worthiness as Arthur's substitute and representative by allowing him to take his place. The Green Knight asks Gawain to promise that he'll seek him out wherever he is on

earth to receive the same blow: "Saf that thou schal siker me, segge, bi thi trawthe, / That thou schal seche me thiself, where-so thou hopes / I may be funde upon folde, and foch the such wages / As thou deles me to-day bifore this douthe ryche" (394-397). He tells Gawain how to find him, asserting that while Camelot doesn't recognize him, many others do: "The knyght of the grene chapel men known me mony" (454). The Green Knight, perhaps like the natural world, can be found by those who seek it. Thus, Gawain successfully beheads the Green Knight, who nevertheless survives and picks up his own bloodied head.[10] While aspects of his wildness are tempered to befit his courtly surroundings, the Green Knight, emblematic of the regenerating natural world and able to survive death, again resembles the Green Man trope. As Gillian Rudd writes:

> The Green Man becomes an acknowledgement of forces beyond the human, but also a way of containing those forces, of making the idea safe. His disruptive character and his ability to survive death reassert the power of natural life forces and cycles, which is particularly welcome in the depths of winter, but by making his manifestation human he is also available to be brought within the bounds of human culture. Thus, he may be found adorning churches, or interrupting a feast to declare a seasonal challenge. (*Greenery*, 111)

While the Green Knight's power and wildness is momentarily contained, he nevertheless represents forces beyond the scope of Arthur's knights' expertise. Yet, something in the

[10] It's worth considering an ancient Hindu depiction of the goddess Kali, carrying in one arm a weapon, and in the other a bloodied, severed head. In this tradition, the severed head represents divine wisdom or consciousness, or the destruction of ignorance. Of course, time and geographical limitations make it unlikely that the Gawain Poet knew detailed information about Hindu gods and goddesses. However, given that I'm attempting to read *SGGK* in light of the early Western nature tradition, where Nature acts as an intermediary between divine wisdom and humankind's ignorance, *and* with the Green Knight as the representative force of the natural world, I wonder if we might argue that he too contains the ability to transform ignorance into wisdom.

Green Knight spurs Gawain to action, and now he must honor his promise to the otherworldly intruder and face his imminent death by beheading.

In Fitt II, the Gawain Poet begins to fill his poem with exquisite images of the natural world: namely, the passing of the seasons. In the Middle Ages, wilderness is a landscape often reflective or representative of one's interior experience or state of mind. Jessica Rezunyk writes that "while the descriptions of nature give modern readers some insight into the physicality of the medieval natural world, they also provide us with tremendous insight into how medieval thinkers reconciled human spirituality and the natural world" (135). The Gawain Poet's seasonal poetry, both extravagant and evocative, offers insight into Gawain's ordeal, intensified by the year-long delay of his quest. The seasons pass, each one "merging beautifully and inevitably into the next" (Woods, 214). And while the festivities of Camelot are briefly mentioned in passing, they seem trivial, as if only there to emphasize human impermanence and mutability against the steadfast reliability of nature's regeneration: "A yere yernes ful yerne and yeldes never lyke; / The forme to the fynisment foldes ful selden" (498-9). The agent of change ("Forthi this Yol overyede," 500) propelling the year forward both begins and ends with winter. The Gawain Poet passes quickly by spring, its rain "schowres ful warme" (506), and the blooming flowers "blossumes bolne to blowe" (511), with summer's "soft wyndes" paving the way for autumn's hardening, as it warns plants of winter's approach: "warnes hym for the wynter to wax ful rype" (522). As in Alain's *De Planctu*, there's a sense of ease that comes with the onset of summer, that contrasts sharply with the harshness of winter. Gillian Rudd writes that "we are given little time to rejoice in the new life of spring, the warmth of summer or the plenty of autumn, instead we are hustled on to the cold of winter" (*Greenery*, 117). The Gawain Poet thus ends the passing of the

seasons with an ominous conclusion, the return to winter reminding Gawain immediately of his anxious journey:

> And thus yirnes the yere in yisterdayes mony,
> And wynter wyndes ayayn, as the worlde askes, no fage.
> Til Meghalmas mone
> Was cumen wyth wynter wage;
> Then thenkkes Gawan ful sone
> Of his anious vyage. (529-535)

The Gawain Poet's seasonal imagery, a bridge for Gawain between being and becoming, reiterates the cyclical nature of seasons, while emphasizing the "irretrievably linear nature of human life" (A. V. C. Schmidt, 151) and Gawain's increasing awareness of his imminent death.

Gawain begins to dress for his voyage into the wilderness, both he and Gryngolet outfitted in spectacular armor. In a passage spanning over one hundred lines (566-669), the Gawain Poet both emphasizes the richness and splendor of Gawain's attire, and evokes a classical example of the arming convention, recalling an older, romanticized literary topos. Gawain's clothing echoes the Green Knight's and, more implicitly, Nature's: the silk band covering his neck-guard embroidered "and bounden wyth the best gemmes" (609), his apparel featuring "bryddes on semes" (610), with parrots, periwinkles, turtledoves, and true-love-knots ("papjayes," "pervyng," "tortors," and "trulofes" 611-12) richly displayed on his clothing. If the embroidered birds and butterflies on the Green Knight's clothing represent an aspect of his character, and the birds on Nature's woolen garment represent one creature over whom she rules and guides, we might view Gawain's apparel covered in birds and foliage as

an attempt to reunite with the natural world. If he can individually repair his fractured relationship with nature, and remove the “little cloud of stupor” from his own mind, perhaps as the representative of Camelot, he can pave the way for the court to do the same.

An idealized knight, Gawain bears a pentangle of "pure golde" (620) on his gleaming, red shield, with an image of Mary hidden inside it. The eternal pentangle, fashioned in an "endeles knot" (630), suits the worthy knight "semlyly fayre" (622). Spearing writes that Gawain "goes forth on his quest as the representative of a delicate complex of civilized and religious values," (175) contained in the “fautles” (640) pentangle's virtues: "fraunchyse," "felawschyp," "clannes," "cortaysye," and "pite" (652-4). While the pentangle's five wounds of Christ and the image of the Virgin Mary reflect the Gawain Poet's Christian context, sacralizing both Arthur's secular court and Gawain's quest, the interlocking design suggests that all virtues depend on the others, and should Gawain fail in one, he'll fail in all. The narrator deems this unlikely, however, given the five unfailing sets of five fixed to the knight: "Now alle these fyve sythes, for sothe, were fetled on this knyght, / And uchone halched in other, that non ende hade, / And fyched upon fyve poyntes that fayld never, / Ne samned never in no syde, ne sundred nouther, / Withouten ende" (659-660). Woods believes Gawain's armor to be a "chivalric skin, both a protection and an extension of the inner man" (216). Gawain's pentangle, then, might be seen as the seemingly infallible representation of human worthiness, its wearer a vessel worthy of interaction with and guidance from the divine.

Gawain leaves behind the familiarity of Camelot and heads north towards “contrayez straunge,” (713) in the direction he believes he might find the green chapel and his mysterious opponent. The Gawain Poet outlines the knight's journey in just over two stanzas

(lines 691-752) where we're shown his travels "thurgh the ryalme of Logres," into North Wales, passing the "iles of Angelsay" on his left. From there he "fares over the fordes" at Holy Head, entering the "wyldrenesse of Wyrale" at line 701. While we may not know the exact location of Holy Head, the implication in the text is that the Gawain Poet's medieval audience might: the initial landscape description reads as identifiable, if not local. Wales "operates as a borderland, a familiar place through which Gawain passes in order to arrive at his yet-undiscovered destination" (Rudd, "Wilderness of Wirral," 58). As such, Gawain's landscape becomes increasingly vague as he travels beyond the bounds of mapped, familiar landmarks through "gates straunge" and into "contrayez straunge." There he encounters a host of fierce foes along the way that challenge his knightly endurance, including "wormes" (presumably dragons, though perhaps serpents), snarling wolves, "wodwos" or trolls, bulls, bears, wild boars, and giants (720-23). Ernst Robert Curtius writes that "Medieval descriptions of nature are not meant to represent reality" (183) and Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter agree, writing of the Old English poem *The Seafarer* that "… the poet's description of [winter] is valid in terms of natural reality and personal experience, but that validity is subsumed in a larger purpose which concerns itself with spiritual and conceptual truth. These priorities are important, for they operate in most medieval descriptions of nature" (Pearsall, 42). They add that for "many medieval poets, the image of exile in winter … potently conveys both the quality of Northern European landscape and the inner desolation of the spirit" (122). Thus, I suggest we can read the Gawain Poet's harsh, inhospitable setting with its matching inhabitants as a reflection of both Gawain's interiority and of his current spiritual state: while it "potently conveys" the bleakness of northern England, his encounter with—and near death by—the harsh winter weather in the "wylde"

also suggests a bleakness or “desolation” of spirit, a knight in need of grace, guidance, and divine aid.

The reality of fourteenth-century wilderness clashes with the Gawain Poet's description: rather than a remote, natural, untouched plot of land, medieval "wildernesses" or forests were highly controlled and contained spaces, stocked with plentiful game to ensure a lord's entertainment (Twomey 32-3). Twomey writes of fourteenth-century forests that they would be, in reality, "shaped, tended, and exploited for human use" (39). The Gawain Poet, on the other hand, imagines romanticized wild spaces bordering on idyllic. Gillian Rudd writes that we see the Gawain Poet's wilderness as a fine balance between "archetypal forest of romance" and an actual place, "only because we have the images of romance forests and symbolic wildernesses to tell us what we are looking at" ("The Wilderness of Wirral," 57).

Of the creatures he encounters, Gawain's fiercest foe is winter ("winter was wors," 726).[11] If we take nature to be a force that “pricks” the human spirit, as I do here, encouraging reason-endowed humankind towards a state of higher divine consciousness just as Chaucer's Nature compels people to go on religious pilgrimage, winter is the Gawain Poet's representation of this same rousing energy. "Ner sleyn wyth the slete" (729), winter acts upon Gawain's body and spirit, bringing him to the brink of death. In "peril and peyne," (733) Gawain prays to Mary, that she should guide him. He enters into a wild, overgrown "forest ful dep" (741), with high hills on either side, surrounded in the middle by huge, "hore okes" (743). Hazel and hawthorn, tangled together, crossed his path, covered also by "roghe raged mosse" (744-5). There were birds peeping pitifully "for pyne of the cold" (747) on the trees'

[11] Michael W. Twomey writes that the "extreme cold and now during Gawain's journey" might be linked to a "Little Ice Age," a European cooling period that lasted from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, causing the River Thames to often freeze in winter (29).

bare, tangled branches. Ralph Elliott writes that "the poet's attention to details ... direct attention to the symbolic import of the scene: the entanglement of the forest mirrors Gawain's ensnarement" (107). Alone Gawain and his equine-companion Gryngolet traveled, "ensnared," through "mony misy and mire" (749). Gawain, concerned for the state of his soul (a paramount concern in the Middle Ages) and his life, prays again to both God and Mary for shelter. In what I view as a pivotal moment of transformation, Gawain's encounter with winter proves so terrible, he must pray a third time for divine aid. Crying, he crosses himself and begs Christ to be near him in his need, "Cros Kryst me spede! (762). In this crucial moment of bleak despair, in the depths of winter, he supplicates, praying for divine guidance. By seeking aid outside of himself through the simple act of prayer, I posit that he simultaneously releases his self-sufficiency and his ego, the first step in lifting the veil between divine, omniscient Nature and himself. Gawain appears to acknowledge that neither his armor nor the virtues symbolized by his pentangle offer any aid to him against the external weather, and his internal desolation of spirit. Instead, he must relinquish the ego largely wrapped in his identity as an Arthurian knight and nephew of Arthur, and seek guidance from someone (or something) greater than himself. As such, the Gawain Poet's nature—in the form of winter—is not unlike Macrobius' nature: a transformative, divine force acting upon Gawain, urging him forward on the path from being to becoming.

Immediately following Gawain's third and final prayer, Hautdesert becomes visible in front of him, a magnificent stronghold inside a moat, with towers and turrets and "pynakle payntet" (800), surrounded entirely by a fenced park ("a park al aboute, / Wyth a pyked palays" 768-9). A haven against winter's elements ("The walles wer wel arayed - / Hit dut no wyndes blaste" 783-4), the poet grants Gawain momentary refuge from the tangled

“wyldrenesse,” as he happens upon something resembling the familiar world of courtly society. Bertilak welcomes Gawain into his home, a warm, comfortable, respite from winter. The Gawain Poet describes Bertilak as a powerful, stern, and large man who stands firm, with a fiery, bold face, and a “bever-hwed”[12] beard: "a hoge hathel for the nones, and of hyghe eldee. / Brode, bryght was his berde, and al bever-hwed, / Sturne, stif on the stryththe on stalworth schonkes, / Felle face as the fyre, and fre of hys speche" (844-46). The knight’s room at Hautdesert is as comforting as it is sumptuous: ornamented with silks and tapestries from Toulouse and Turkestan, it has bed-curtains for privacy and bright ermine-paneled coverlets ("bryght blaunmer" 856), recalling the white ermine lining of the Green Knight's mantle and hood. Gawain's "bryght boure" (853) at Hautdesert also recalls the richness of Camelot, as similar cloths (a canopy of “tryed Toulouse”) and tapestries lined Guinevere’s dais in Fitt I. Gawain, outfitted for the first time in a color that's not heraldic red or gold, wears a borrowed brown mantle ("fayre furred wythinne with felles of the best, / Alle of ermine in erde, his hode of the same" 880-1) that replaces his gleaming armor. Gawain’s role changes along with his setting and dress, as he's not currently inhabiting the role of a knight in immediate need of weaponry and physical strength, but rather that of a greatly admired guest about to face a new test: one of mental fortitude and sexual temptation.

Alain’s *De Planctu* and Chaucer’s *Parliament* rather scathingly portray sexuality and lust as the antithesis of reason and virtue, while positioning Venus negatively alongside vices or in the perpetual darkness of a brass temple. Alain’s insistence on chastity as the path towards a virtuous life speaks to Macrobius’ belief in reason as a divinely endowed gift granted solely to humankind: choosing reason over lust allows one to ascend towards God. Thus, Gawain’s

[12] Though not bush-like, Bertilak’s similar beaver-hued beard recalls the Green Knight’s appearance in the earlier court.

insistence on maintaining his chastity, and his rejection of the lady's more lascivious offers, suggest that the Gawain Poet's thinking aligns with Alain and Chaucer: reason and chastity—as opposed to lust and sexual desire—guide one towards a higher consciousness.

Carolyn Dinshaw's famous essay addresses the implications of the game set for Gawain by Bertilak: the rules state that both Bertilak and Gawain will exchange their winnings, a "game" that lasts three days. As such, should Gawain submit to his desires and sleep with the lady, he will have to have sleep with Bertilak too. The unproblematic gift-giving and exchange of kisses in Arthur's court now figures as part of a trap. Dinshaw writes that "homosexual sex is thus one hypothetical fulfillment—in fact we might say *the* logical end of the interlocking plots the lady and Bertilak play out—but it is a forbidden end. … The narrative, that is, produces the possibility of homosexual relations only to—in order to—preclude it" (206). By precluding homoerotic love, the Gawain Poet instead establishes heterosexuality, but more specifically, chastity as the morally virtuous route that anyone seeking to better themselves spiritually should logically follow.

While Bertilak hunts, his lady attempts to seduce Gawain into becoming her lover. Gawain finds her attractive, more so than even Guinevere ("wener than Wenore" 945), and the Lady is described as beautiful in the demure way befitting medieval beauty standards: Wyth chynne and cheke ful swete, / Bothe quit and red in blande, / Ful lufly con ho lete / Wyth lyppez smal laghande" (1204-7). Yet, the small laugh on her lips betrays away her enjoyment in this seduction "game," emphasized by her three provocatory visits to Gawain's bedroom. She is, perhaps, "pricking" his courage, though as yet we're unsure of the choice he'll make between sexual or procreative desire and worship. The narrator also likens the lady's body to the natural world: "Hir brest and hir bryght throte bare displayed, / Schon

schyrer than snawe that schedes on hilles" (955-6). Through use of natural metaphors, the poet works to keep in our minds the tension between nature and civilization, and their claims on Gawain.

The purity or "clannesse" of their conversations contrasts with her behavior towards him: she joins him in his bed, "cachez hym in armez, / Loutez luflych adoun and the leude kyssez" (1305-6), and locks the door behind her upon entering his bedroom. On her second visit, the Lady combines her physical persistence with repeated reminders that while Bertilak hunts, they're alone: "I com hider sengel, and sitte / To lerne at yow sum game; / Dos, techez me of your wytte, / Whil my lorde is fro hame" (1531-4). Her "sum game" echoes the repetition of vague "sum" during her first visit to his room, where she reassures him that he hasn't behaved poorly, but rather that he embodies courtesy as anyone else "couth not lyghtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady" without desiring a kiss or "sum towche of summe tryfle at sum tales ende" (1299-1300).

Her third visit makes it clear that Gawain's chastity is being tested, as well as his courtesy as Bertilak's guest. In his most tempted state yet, the narrator interjects to indicate the severity of Gawain's situation: "Thay lanced wordes gode, / Much wele then watz therinne; / Gret perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Mare of hir knyght mynne" (1766-9). Like Alain's insistence on chastity, the narrator's reference to the Virgin Mary emphasizes Gawain's devotion to both his own chastity and to Mary: he carries her image inside his shield, and prayed to her when he was most ensnared by winter. When the lady implies that he has a love at home as reason for his rejection of her advances, Gawain invokes St. John, known for his virginity: "The knyghte sayde, 'Be sayn Jon,' / And smethely con he smyle, / 'In fayth I welde right non, / Ne non wil welde the quile'" (1788-91). Nevertheless, whether due to

extraordinary self-mastery, or a strict, personal adherence to knightly cortaysye, he resists her, though he does feel "wroth with hymselven" (1660) for responding to her advances at all. However, while he rejects her sexual advances and keeps his vow of chastity, he does falter in his acceptance of the green girdle, a "drury" (2033) or love-token. That all of this occurs simultaneously with Bertilak's grisly hunts certainly requires consideration. While no real danger faces Gawain, his vulnerable position mirrors that of the utterly exposed deer, running until they're caught with an arrow, Gawain's new brown, fur-trimmed mantle reminiscent of their brown hides. Implicit in each seduction scene is whether Gawain's chivalry is worthy of his status as Arthur's representative. And, more importantly, whether his inner strength and self-awareness can withstand the challenge put forth by nature. Though he momentarily falters, it appears that he nevertheless exercises his reason while tempering his lust. As in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Gawain requires the "prick" of nature in order to consistently choose reason (and God) over lust. And, as Alain's Nature tells us, doing so sets Gawain on a sure path towards consciousness, striving forward towards his highest possible state.

Gawain remains largely unaware of the significance of his journey until the very end. Outfitted in the hidden green girdle in order to "saven hymself" (2040) when he must willingly and without resistance submit to the Green Knight's axe, Gawain leaves the comfort of Hautdesert, riding into the wilderness with a guide. Paralleling the winter landscape he traveled through on his way to Hautdesert, full of "peryl and payne and plytes ful harde" (733), he once again finds himself exposed to nature's elements. He and his guide pause atop a cliff, looking out over the moors and mountains, layered in mist: "Mist muged on the mor, malt on the mountes. / Uch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge" (2080-81). The brooks

boiled and broke ("byled and breke" 2082), rushing forth as though energized. The guide takes the opportunity to warn Gawain from seeking the Green Knight, for he is "stiffe and sturne, and to strike lovies" (2099), with a "body bigger then the best fowre / That ar in Arthures hous" (2101-2). He offers to conceal Gawain from the Green Knight and keep his secret, that Gawain ought to "let the gome one, / And gos away sum other gate, upon Goddes halve!" (2118-19). While we recognize that the beheading is not the crucial test set for Gawain, we nevertheless have no doubt that he'll politely decline the guide. The "fautles" Gawain clearly intends to honor his agreement, appearing anxious at the thought of missing it, at first hesitant to even accept Bertilak's offer to stay at his castle beyond Christmas. Gawain thanks his guide, replying, "Bot helde thou hit never so holde, and I here passed, / Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme that thou tellez, / I were a knyght kowarde, I myght not be excused'" (2126-31). However faithful his promise, if Gawain were to flee, he tells his guide, he'd be a cowardly knight, an inexcusable offense for the representative of both Camelot and the five virtues embodied in his pentangle. Instead, he continues onward towards what he believes is his looming death. This time no refuge appears and Gawain is entirely isolated and without the support of a community. The landscape, like that of a barren wasteland, appears to close in around Gawain:

> And thenne he wayted hym aboute, and wylde hit hym thoght,
> And seye no syngne of resette bisydes nowhere,
> Bot hyghe bonkkes and brent upon bothe halve,
> And rughe knokled knarres with knorned stones;
> The skwes of the scowtes skayned hym thoght. (2163-2167)

While Bertilak's castle was situated in the midst of a large, expansive (albeit fenced) park, the the entrance to the green chapel is, in contrast, set in a barren valley, the sky so low as Gawain approaches, that it appears to touch the craggy rocks set on the valley's steep sides that surround him. The heavily alliterated lines laden with "k" sounds mimic what I imagine is the knight's slow, methodical plod forward. He sees a mound or a rounded barrow, words more indicative of a grave rather than a chapel, perhaps fitting if we determine this to be not just the Green Knight's chapel, but Nature's: a place where one might contemplate and confront one's inevitable death and decay, given the mutability of nature's realm. Gawain appears increasingly exposed and vulnerable, as the sounds of a grinding axe greet his ears (a sharp contrast to the harmonious melodies found in Chaucer's "grene mede"), a sound reminiscent of the chaotic and, for the prey, terrifying confusion of Bertilak's hunts. Though he remains steadfast in his quest to face death by beheading, he flinches instinctually at the sight of the axe. Repeating the dynamic at Arthur's court, the Green Knight mocks Gawain, and he, like Arthur, responds in anger, pledging his "trawthe" that he "schal stonde the a strok, and start no more" (2286). The second time, he honors his word, and stands as still as a tree stump, grounded in his pledge ("bot stode stylle as the ston other a stubbe auther" 2293). Exposed and raw, as befits a knight who had recently accepted and faced death, he is stunned by the Green Knight's many revelations: that the Green Knight and Bertilak are the same, and thus the girdle Gawain covets belongs to them. Gawain sees himself as fallen, and looks desperately for someone to blame. What Gawain fails to grasp in his moment of reckoning is the deeply uncomfortable nature of a spiritual test, rather than a physical one: he survives at the expense of his ignorance, imbued with a new understanding, and with increased reason and wisdom. The Green Knight, like the Nature of antiquity, rouses Gawain from the comfort

of Camelot towards the divine, setting him on a path of self-awareness, moving him from being towards becoming.

II. Conclusion

Derek Brewer writes, "Not surprisingly, at the end of the poem, the 'knyght in the enker grene" is described as going "Whiderwarde-soeuer he wolde' (2476-7), an open-ended dismissal of an enigmatic agent, the stimulus to action but not the central character in the story. … As such the very greenness of the Green Knight allows him to be absorbed into some natural world, yet points also to a sense of its ultimate mystery, its forces beyond our knowledge, though not, if we carry ourselves well, out of our control" (190). Early Western thinkers attempted to define this force, positioning nature as a divine intermediary, a force or energy acting upon the will of humankind, urging them towards their highest possible state, and a vivifying, creative force through whom God acts. In the medieval period, Alain de Lille and Geoffrey Chaucer further contain and refashion Nature as a personified goddess, a *vicaria Dei*, who orders and guides all created beings on the sublunary realms, urging them away from vice and towards God-like perfection. This thesis has attempted to show ways in which the Gawain Poet utilizes nature in similar ways, through the trials of Gawain, a "thoroughly self-conscious and articulate hero" (Spearing, 173). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* moves us through natural and seasonal cycles, as Gawain the knight moves through tests of his skill and "cortaysye," and Gawain the Christian moves through states of consciousness and self-awareness. The poem follows Gawain's movements out of Camelot into the "wyldrenesse," as weather, encounters with strange beasts, and temptation test both

his knighthood and his internal spiritual progress. Just as Macrobius, Alain, and Chaucer believe humankind, alone endowed with reason, can and should strive towards their highest possible state through the exercise of reason—or in the *De Planctu*, through chastity as well as reason—so too does the Gawain Poet have his knight continuously choose reason over lust, and chastity over temptation. Gillian Rudd questions why, at the close of the poem, "...we have a man who voluntarily enters the wilderness but who returns to court at the end" (*Greenery*, 109). The poem ends ambiguously, with Gawain, like Alain's narrator-poet, given the necessary tools and knowledge to achieve a higher state of self-awareness and divine consciousness. While the Green Knight reenters the "wylde," Gawain returns to Camelot, where he must reconcile his newfound consciousness—and shame—with the very human realm of court, a realm of ego and duality.

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